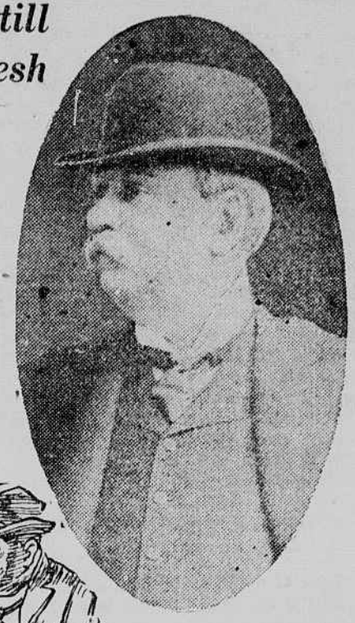
OLD POLICE TRAILS IN THE TOWN THAT WAS

Trails overgrown with the memories of thirty-eight years, a policeman's notebook repeoples them with the crooks, the gangsters, the confidence men and the still more confidence women who once walked them in the flesh

By Arthur James Pegler *Drawings by J. Norman Lynd*

Inspector Williams, a leading man of the "treat 'em rough" school of police work.



Inspector Byrnes, whose name has not been forgotten at headquarters.

"Hire a hall," I told him. "This ain't any place to be making speeches." Then he turned around and gave me that comical, one-sided Croker grin. You could have had my job for a dime.

"JUST a retired 'bull,' bred to the pavements, keen for active service and mighty lonesome for the old gang—aye, even the old offenders. A pensioned policeman's a sad bird. That's me."

This from Francis Cadell, lately retired after thirty-eight years' service on the New York City police force. Cadell's intimates have wondered at his prolonged absence from old haunts. Now the secret is out. I found him going over a pile of notebooks, each one filled from cover to cover with references to persons and events of a departed day. There are 400 of the little books. They date from 1881.

"I don't know what I'll do with all this junk," remarked Cadell, whimsically. "Maybe I'll write my reminiscences. A wise doctor once said that a man is only as old as he feels," he pursued. "If that's true I'm not more than thirty, though my birth certificate tells a different tale. I'm in the prime of life, 'just rampin' wid bull mate,' as one of Mr. Kipling's heroes puts it, but off the roll call—not responsible to anybody except the missus, God save her, for my comings and goings. I'm free to lie abed mornings, if I can, which I can't; free to do as I please, theoretically, but actually—why, say, I'm a cop the same as ever.

"My thoughts run back over the years. They were filled with experiences, some pleasant, many unpleasant. Scores of men and women I have known, classed as criminals, were really victims of unfortunate association. Once tagged, there was no use their trying to be straight. It is hard even now for a person once convicted to escape that stigma or live it down. It used to be harder years ago. Fewer organizations worked for regeneration of the fallen. The way was easy for crooks who made themselves useful to politicians requiring dishonest service.

"Many gloried in criminal cleverness. Those were professionals. They were all sorts—lawyers, doctors, writers, bankers, people who started right, maybe, but picked the wrong road at a crossing and never found the way back—maybe they never tried to.

"One time, along about 1889, I almost quit police work for opera. I had a barytone voice and took some training at the Metropolitan College of Music. I was there with Frank Potter, son of Bishop Henry Codman Potter. Bishop Potter gave me an autographed copy of one of his books called 'The Gates of the East.' I still have it.

"I sure did want to sing in opera," grinned the ex-detective, "but my father, who was a policeman in New York twenty-six years, advised me not to go rainbow chasing. Maybe the old man was right. I don't suppose Caruso's laurels would have been endangered. Just the same I once shook hands with Emma Eames and showed Mme. Melba and Jean de Reszke through the Tenderloin. Francis Wilson offered to try me out in 'Erminie,' but that's the nearest I ever got to singing in opera.

"One of my earliest assignments was to get Jeff Sanders, a coffee-colored crook who shot and killed two patrolmen after a police parade. He tried to kill Captain 'Lightning Charlie' McDonald and Mac got him. Sanders was operating at the time in hotels. There had been several robberies of guests at the St. Denis Hotel, Eleventh Street and Broadway, then a resort of the fashionable.

"When Sanders tackled the St. Denis he made a mistake because he attracted the attention of Inspector Byrnes. The old man ordered him got 'dead or alive.' Staying at the hotel then, I recall, were Roscoe Conkling, Thomas C. Platt, Silas Clayton, of President Cleveland's staff; Postmaster Cornelius Van Cott, Mary Anderson, who soon afterward became Mrs. Navarro; Lord St. Leonards, the Marquis of Waterford and a lot more distinguished men and women from the South.

"Sanders's gang included some of the handsomest 'yaller gals' that ever came out of the South. All were dangerous criminals. Among them was Alice Martin, confidence woman, with a London and Paris record, known in New York as 'the Black Venus,' though she was really olive. She is said to have posed abroad as an Oriental princess. They 'tabbed' her at Scotland Yard as 'Congo Clara.' The Martin woman, with Nellie Curtin, alias 'Texas Nell'; May Munro, a star at the badger game—Sanders's reputed wife; Dolly Palmer, and last, but not least, Nellie Russell, known by her works to every hotel man in New York, reaped a harvest in the Tenderloin.

"There are no colored crooks of their type in New York now. Nearly all these women and many more whose names have slipped my memory were light skinned and handsome enough to pose as Spanish or French. Many spoke the languages of both those countries. They were intelligent, well dressed, capable of mixing in any gathering, and bold operators.

"I arrested Nellie Russell myself. That girl could strip a rounder of everything but his eyelashes on casual acquaintance. Nellie sometimes posed as a Spaniard. Again she'd be the Countess of Something. Speaking Spanish and French fluently, she managed to break into society now and then. After she got set somebody's jewels turned up missing. When we heard the news it was usually after Nellie was on her way. I also picked up 'Curly' Washington, Sanders's particular pal, who shot a woman associate. Within a few days 'Brocky' Moore fell into the toils. He, too, was known in three continents.

"The St. Denis was a gay place those days. The old house still stands—remodeled now. I was thinking the other day as I observed its altered condition of a night when Miss Anderson sang in the big ballroom for charity. I was on the door. Navarro was there, and so was Mary's mother—a mighty nice lady, not too proud to speak civilly to an ordinary policeman. Everybody loved Mary, but Mary loved only Navarro. He lived at the Brevoort, Fifth Avenue and Eighth Street. Miss Anderson would walk down there with her mother afternoons to meet him. The three of them would go riding together in Central Park in a barouche. People ran after the carriage to cheer Mary, who bowed to them like a princess. One day I saw her riding with Navarro. He was sitting straight as a statue—sort of embarrassed at the demonstration, I guess. Mary turned to him and said something. He shook his head—impatiently, it seemed to me—but she kept at him until he bowed, too. They were treated just like royalty.

"One big scandal that came up while Byrnes was in office was the killing of Jim Fiske by Edward Stokes, proprietor of the old Hoffman House. Fiske was a fashionable rounder — what you'd call the "glass of fashion and the mould of form"—a man of the Ward McAllister type, only he hadn't quite so much class as McAllister. Stokes was said to have been devoted to a woman named Minnie Marshfield. Fiske was supposed to have crossed his path in an 'affair' that could only be settled 'as between gentlemen.' Stokes was the survivor.

That killing caused more talk than the killing of Stanford White by Thaw later on. Fiske had been popular

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in a large circle. He was known from one end of the country to the other. The Marshfield woman had a record that folks who had made her acquaintance through Stokes would not credit. Word was passed us that gunmen were on Stokes's trail, so we picked up a few leaders, read them a chapter from the headquarters Rubaiyat and headed off another killing.

One of Stokes's peculiarities was keeping a bodyguard always with him. Billy Edwards, one-time lightweight champion who defeated the original Jack Dempsey, was retained by Stokes on salary. Edwards accompanied him at all times. Stokes used to say that when God made the world and said 'Let there be light' the words expressed his full intention. He said the Lord never meant to have any night, but something went wrong with the plans. Stokes never would sleep anywhere unless lights were blazing. In his room at the hotel he slept under two lighted chandeliers.

"No. 818" Broadway figured prominently about this time. It was a gambling resort frequented by wealthy and influential personages—one of those gilded palaces brought to a climax of luxury later on by Canfield. There were soft carpets on the floors that felt like velvet under foot, big mirrors and glass chandeliers with as many facets as diamonds, all glittering and twinkling. I've heard men who were fleeced there say it was the most fascinating house they were ever in. Stakes were high and every sort of game was played from roulette to fan-tan.

"Political cliques were bolder then than they are now. I won't say politics isn't as crooked as it was then, because some deals pulled off here in the last few years make the boldest efforts of that old gang resemble peanut poker, but the old old timers were more addicted to direct action than are any present day dictators.

Captain Chapman, once "Czar of the Tenderloin" and looking the part.

"Newspapers still print stories about election frauds every time there is an election. I wonder where they would find type big enough or black enough to feature such doings as were common when every stale beer dive in lower town was full of repeaters, voting early and as often as they could find polling places; when gangs of crooks went the rounds, driving opposition voters away from the polls, slugging and killing those who resisted. These operations were directed by powerful cliques that couldn't be reached by ordinary processes. Police duty was lively in those days.

"There were some wise birds around Tammany Hall when Croker was in his heyday. Croker was Fire Commissioner when I joined the force. Whatever they may say of him, he sure had the gift of authority. The greatest organizing he ever did, I suppose, was when he elected Van Wyck as first Mayor of Greater New York, in 1897.

"I had one personal experience with Mr. Croker. I had been assigned to a Tammany meeting, and was hustling the crowd that blocked the street. The center of attraction was a thick-set man in a fur-collared overcoat. He had the collar turned up around his face. I began slanging this fellow for blocking the thoroughfare.

"'Hire a hall,' I told him. 'This isn't any place to be making speeches.'

"'I did hire a hall,' says the man, 'but the meeting's out and they won't let me go home.'

"Then he turned round and gave me that comical one-sided Croker grin. Lord! You could have had my job for a dime, but there wasn't any comeback. I cleared a lane for the chief and he went on his way. I never heard any more of the incident, though some of my friends still kid me about ordering Croker to move.

"Just about that time there was a big fuss in theatrical circles. Fanny Davenport was appearing at Daly's with Melbourne McDowell as her leading man. Going into Niblo's one day she encountered Mrs. McDowell and informed the lady she intended taking McDowell away from her.

Mrs. McDowell, whose stage name was Davis, was singing with the William T. Carleton Opera Company. She became excited and for awhile it looked like a riot. Fannie made good her word. Very soon after that McDowell was playing Antony to her Cleopatra. The

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night of the fracas they had sent for Augustin Daly to pour oil on troubled waters.

"We had some wild women to deal with. There was Nellie Dunn, who operated with a confidence man named Arthur T. Slavin, one of the smoothest of them all, now dead. Mike Lyons, of the Lyons restaurant in Broadway, was an admirer of hers. I remember that Alec Williams, police inspector of the 4th District, sent for Lyons and told him that the Dunn woman was a criminal with a record, but you can't do anything with 'em when they're that way. Nellie 'nicked' Lyons for a hundred thousand and that closed him. He died soon after.

"Dunn and Slavin were members of a bad gang. It included such characters as 'Broken Nose Burke', alias 'Deafy,' whose real name was Mike Cullen. He and 'Reddy the Blacksmith' were side partners of 'Dog Sharkey', now doing a long term. I mention these people because they were concerned in a spectacular escape from the Tombs of Sharkey, who was awaiting trial. They accompanied Maggie Jordan, the 'Madcap Mag' of whom Gerald Fortesque later wrote a novel under that title. She went to the Tombs, changed clothes with Sharkey in his cell and sent him out past the guards dressed in her own.

"New York's big men appreciated police efficiency back in the '80s and '90s. For instance, after Inspector Murray of the 3d District rounded up the Astoria masked burglars—a gang that robbed residences of the ultra-wealthy along Riverside Drive—the inspector was invited to a testimonial dinner by leading bankers. J. P. Morgan—the elder, of course—Seligman, Schiff, Loeb and other millionaires and multi-millionaires attended. They told Murray what a great copper he was and presented him with a diamond star said to have cost $2,000.

"That Astoria gang was the worst we ever had to contend with. Jerry McAuley, afterward reformed, and for many years head of the McAuley Mission in lower town, was leader of that outfit. His associates were "Red" Leary, "Big Jim" Casey, John and Jimmy Hope, Bob Irving and Ed Casey. While McAuley was active head of the band a white-handed boy by the name of Frank McCoy—you'd have thought butter wouldn't melt in his mouth—was the master mind. All these were criminals with long records, who ought to have been in jail. They had influential friends.

"We knew plenty to have hanged the lot, but it's one thing to know and another to prove. McCoy was an odd character. One of his favorite disguises was that of a preacher with an all-round collar and Prince Albert coat. I've seen ministers greet him in hotel lobbies as a reverend brother, his make-up was that good.

"Once in McCoy's career he came within hail of reformation. After his arraignment one day for conspiracy to rob, following the burglary of a residence on Fifth Avenue, the man whose home had been looted visited McCoy in the Tombs and offered to befriend him if he would go straight. The man was a rich manufacturer. He employed Frank, who seemed to be headed for a respectable career at a rapid gait.

"One day McCoy walked into the office of his benefactor and resigned. He said he couldn't travel a straight road; that some people were born to be crooks, and he was one of them. McCoy's business relations were all straight and his employer told Inspector Byrnes he would go to any pains and expense to save the man, but McCoy said he wanted to travel.

"McCoy later told the chief privately that he couldn't stand being tagged all the time as a crook. The spice of life for a man like him, he said, was in being able at least part of the time to associate with men and women who did not know him for a criminal and therefore treated him like a human being. Another thing, he said, was that he had fallen in love with a girl of social position whom he could not marry, so he wanted to get away as quickly as he could.

"Among the feminine stars of that crowd was Minnie Palmer, who became later a confidence operator in France and England. I think she received a long term when Scotland Yard landed her a few years ago. Minnie was a writer for 'Leslie's Magazine' when I first met her. Even after she had a record as long as her own arm she used to break into magazines occasionally. She told me she wrote for recreation. Her stories were all about criminals. Vice was always punished and Virtue always victorious, but they were like some of our present day motion picture dramas—they glorified the crook while condemning crime.

"There was one story Minnie wrote—I forget what magazine it was printed in—but the title was 'The Damnation of David.' I've still got a few instalments. The main character was a forger, and Minnie wrote about him as one who knew, which she certainly did. In the story David, who was easily to be recognized as Harry Clayton, noted bank thief and forger, never forged a check to get money for himself. No, sir. He always did it to save some society girl from being compromised or for some other exalted reason. The Palmer girl certainly wrote entertainingly, but she was a born bad lot.

"That reminds me of 'Bill' Brockway, another of Minnie Palmer's associates. He always asked for a Bible and a Congregational hymnbook as soon as he landed in the Tombs. That fellow could con you out of your only overcoat. He was as smooth as a wet seal. Another of that gang was Ellen Peck, who had an international reputation. Harry Clayton was Brockway's partner in fake Broad Street brokerage offices. We cleaned that nest out and sent the crooks away. They put over some big jobs in this town, though, that were never proved on them. The last I heard of Brockway he was a stool pigeon for the Secret Service Department in Washington, a job for which he was surely qualified.

"Of course, in the old days there were jobs to be done that required tact. When full-fed gentry of the social elite became overloaded with pep and exceeded conventional bounds it wasn't considered good form to rush a clubroom full of millionaires. The idea was to "tip somebody off" that this or that feature of their program was attracting too much attention. No arrests, no reports—just a nice, quiet, amiable gentlemen's agreement. That was the general method, but you know about the "best laid plans o' mice and men." Sometimes they do.

"There was the Seely dinner. That was in Mr. Roosevelt's administration as Police Commissioner. I personally arrested 'Little Egypt,' a professional dancer who was performing before 300 clubmen and members of the Four Hundred at Sherry's. I didn't like the job. It was one of those assignments that few police officers are ambitious to get because there's always a kickback, and one may get caught in it. Sherry himself was not in New York at the time. The arrangements were afterward said to have been made without his knowledge. Herbert Barnum Seely, who gave the dinner, was a rich man. From all I understood, his motive was to gain social favor by the hurrah route, going in for what Hamilton Fish called 'the heavy bizarre.' Anyway, here's what happened, and my recollection of the detail is freely clear.

"Lottie Mortimer, theatrical performer, with her stepfather, Sol Harris, burlesque actor, told Captain Chapman, then known as 'Czar of the Tenderloin,' that Lottie had been offered $1,000 to do a dance for a society dinner party at Sherry's and had rejected the offer. Lottie said 'Litle Egypt,' then in the height of her local fame as a dancer, had accepted. It was to be a nude dance, Lottie said. Captain Chapman and I reached Sherry's about the time things were warming up. Champagne had been flowing in floods. One of the most popular men of the younger smart set was playing the piano. Half the guests were seated and the other half prancing about the floor, glasses in hand, keeping time to the music. In the center of things was 'Little Egypt.'

"Some of the guests tried to make Chapman see that there would be more harm than good in creating a scene. He was obdurate. I was ordered to arrest 'Little Egypt.' I stepped out and tapped the lady on her bare shoulder. She was right in the middle of the 'Danse du Ventre' or some such foreign performance. That sort of thing was considered shocking then.

"'What is it?' she inquired, cool as you please.

"'Madam,' I said, 'Captain Chapman is afraid you may catch cold. He requests that you put on wraps.'

"Egypt laughed and accompanied me from the floor. She took my arm, too. I felt like a harem robber. The young woman was fined in magistrate's court, and the incident might have ended there without publicity, but because there was so much criticism of his course Chapman went to Police Commissioner Roosevelt and laid the matter before him. I don't know what the Commissioner said to Chapman, but anyway the latter wasn't satisfied. He told his story to Andrew Parker, who was always at odds with Roosevelt. Parker told Chapman to take his case to the Police Board and demand a trial. This he did and it brought the deluge. Every detail of the Seely dinner came out. The divorce mill was busy for a long time afterward. It must have made great pickings for the lawyers.

"In those days you were liable any minute to bump into men and women on the street who were supposed to be doing time up the river, and it was the business of a good policeman to know who was who at Headquarters. Many New York coppers were blind in one eye, as you might put it, and some couldn't see at all after dusk. I used to have occasional attacks of myopia myself."